

settlers, America has provided for our veterans. Way back in 1636, the Pilgrims of Plymouth County agreed that members of the colony would support soldiers disabled in the battles with the Pequot Indians. One hundred forty years later, the Continental Congress moved to provide pensions for soldiers disabled by the War for Independence.

In the following decades, Congress enacted many more measures to support our retired service men and women. On June 22, 1944, Congress passed the GI bill, one of the most significant pieces of legislation in our country's history. Initially, the proposal to provide educational assistance to our vets was met with controversy. But after successful lobbying by the American Legion, the GI bill was passed unanimously in both Houses. It is now considered one of the most influential pieces of legislation enacted since the Homestead Act.

The GI bill has not only opened the door to higher education for millions of Americans, it has transformed America from a society of renters to a society of homeowners. It is the Veterans Affairs Department that has so successfully overseen this tremendous achievement.

An area of special interest to me is veterans health. Before coming to the Senate, I spent at least a portion of every week serving our veterans, through surgery, in the operating rooms in veterans hospitals, whether it was the veterans hospital in Nashville, TN, or when I was on the west coast. But literally every week, over the period of my entire professional career in medicine, I was serving veterans in a hospital, performing heart surgery and lung surgery and removing cancers from their chests.

The VA hospitals in particular have been successful in streamlining their health information technologies. As we reach out today, focusing on our overall health care system—our health care sector, I should say; we don't have a real health care system in this country—we are looking to the Veterans' Administration and their now over 20 years of experience of health information sharing throughout a system, hospital to hospital and hospital to physician's office.

A study published in the New England Journal of Medicine found that for a discrete set of measures, VA patients were in better health and received more recommended treatments as compared to Medicare patients treated on a fee-for-service basis.

According to the VA's own medical professionals, a computer system called VISTA is the key to their success. Sanford Garfunkel, the director of the VA Medical Center in Washington, DC, says:

I'm proud of what we do here but it isn't that we have more resources. The difference is information.

I applaud the VA hospitals for their innovation and for their commitment. I had the opportunity, before coming to the Senate, to see it firsthand in the

patients I took care of in our VA hospitals. Each day, the physicians and nurses in these hospitals are advancing that mission of the Veterans Affairs agency to—in the words of Abraham Lincoln—"care for him who has borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan."

It is in that spirit that I pledge to our Nation's veterans to pass legislation prior to the August recess to ensure that the veterans health care system has the resources necessary to care for those who have stood in harm's way for us.

Tonight, the VA Diamond Jubilee celebrations will be kicked off with an event at the DAR Constitution Hall here in Washington, DC. In the following weeks and months, our Nation's veterans, their families, and grateful communities will come together in celebrations all over the country to honor the deep contributions of our service men and women.

Thank you to the VA and to our women and men of the Armed Forces, including the new generation of veterans coming back from Afghanistan and Iraq. America owes you a great debt of gratitude, and we intend to—and will—continue that long and proud tradition of providing for our soldiers even after they have left the battlefield.

ORDER OF BUSINESS

Mr. FRIST. Mr. President, another way to honor our veterans is to honor the men and women currently serving in our military. Yesterday, we did begin the Defense authorization bill. I do urge my colleagues to come to the Senate floor now, this morning, with their amendments. We must do so now in order to complete this bill. We will consider the legislation amendment by amendment, in an orderly way. It is my intention, in consultation with the bill manager, to file cloture on this bill in short order. That should send a strong signal that now is the time for people to come to the Chamber with their amendments.

I also plan to offer an amendment to the Defense authorization bill to preserve our longstanding relationship between the Department of Defense and the Boy Scouts of America. This legislation is necessary—it is unfortunate it is necessary, but it is necessary—to press back on the lawsuits that seek to sever the ties between our military, which has hosted the Boy Scout Jamboree on its bases, and the Boy Scouts of America.

America's youth can learn so much from the men and women in uniform today: love of country, commitment to values, sacrifice for others. It is simply wrongheaded to conclude that Pentagon support of the Boy Scouts of America violates the establishment clause. It is time to return some common sense to the courts.

On Monday, July 25, thousands of Scouts from all around the country

will begin arriving at Fort AP Hill. Let's protect that relationship. We have an opportunity to do so. It is time for us to act.

We will also be considering gun liability legislation before we leave. Given the profusion of litigation, the Department of Defense faces the very real prospect of outsourcing sidearms for our soldiers to foreign manufacturers. Let me repeat, given the amount, the profusion of litigation, the Department of Defense faces the real prospect of having to outsource sidearms for our soldiers to foreign manufacturers.

The Baretta Corporation, for instance, makes the standard sidearm for the U.S. Armed Forces. They have the long-term contracts to supply these pistols to our forces in Iraq. Recently, the company had this to say:

The decision of the D.C. Court of Appeals . . . has the likelihood of bankrupting, not only Baretta U.S.A., but every maker of semiautomatic pistols and rifles since 1991.

Without this legislation, it is possible the American manufacturers of legal firearms will be faced with the real prospect of going out of business, ending a critical source of supply for our Armed Forces, our police, and our citizens.

The legislation prohibits one narrow category of lawsuits: suits against the firearms industry for damages resulting from the criminal or unlawful misuse of a firearm or ammunition by a third party.

Over two dozen lawsuits have been filed on a variety of theories, all seeking the same politically motivated goal: putting our industry out of business. This is wrong.

These frivolous suits threaten a domestic industry that is critical to our national defense, jeopardize hundreds of thousands of jobs, and put at risk law-abiding citizens who have guns for recreational use.

Many support this legislation, including the Fraternal Order of Police. I am hopeful, with the cooperation of Members, we can complete all action on this legislation before the recess.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

NOMINATION OF THOMAS C. DORR TO BE UNDER SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT—Resumed

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the Senate will proceed to executive session for the consideration of Calendar No. 101, which the clerk will report.

The legislative clerk read the nomination of Thomas C. Dorr, of Iowa, to be Under Secretary of Agriculture for Rural Development.